

# Students With Disabilities at Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions

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## First Look

Raue, K., and Lewis, L. (2011). *Students With Disabilities at Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions* (NCES 2011–018). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

## Introduction

### Sample

- The sample for the survey consisted of the 1,558 2-year and 4-year degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the PEQIS panel in the fall of 2009.
- The PEQIS panel is a previously recruited nationally representative sample of 2-year and 4-year Title IV eligible degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States. It includes public, private not-for-profit, and private for-profit institutions.

### Data Collection

- The survey was conducted during the 2009–10 academic year, from November 2009 to June 2010.
- Surveys were sent to PEQIS coordinators who were asked to forward the survey to the person or office at their institution most knowledgeable about students with disabilities.
- For the current study, a disability was defined as a physical or mental condition that causes functional limitations that substantially limit one or more major life activities, including mobility, communication (seeing, hearing, speaking), and learning.
- Information in this report represents only those students who had identified themselves in some way to the institution as having a disability, since these are the only students about whom the institutions could report.
- The survey also included questions about institutional practices and accessibility that were completed by all institutions regardless of whether they enrolled any students with disabilities.

### Response Rates

- The unweighted survey response rate was 91 percent and the weighted response rate was 89 percent.
- Data were adjusted for questionnaire nonresponse and weighted to yield national estimates that represent the estimated 4,200 2-year and 4-year Title IV eligible degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States.

## Key Findings from 2011 Report

- During the 12-month 2008–09 academic year, 88 percent of 2-year and 4-year Title IV degree-granting postsecondary institutions reported enrolling students with disabilities. Almost all (99 percent) public 2-year and 4-year institutions reported enrolling students with disabilities.
- Institutions reported enrolling approximately 707,000 students with disabilities in the 12-month 2008–09 academic year, with about half of these students reported enrolled in public 2-year institutions.
- A large percentage of institutions that enrolled students with disabilities during the 12-month 2008–09 academic year reported enrolling students with specific learning disabilities (86 percent), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (79 percent), mobility limitations or orthopedic impairments (76 percent), mental illness/psychological or psychiatric conditions (76 percent), health impairments/conditions, including chronic conditions (73 percent), difficulty hearing (73 percent), or difficulty seeing (67 percent).
- Regarding the types of student disabilities reported by institutions, about one-third of disabilities reported by institutions were specific learning disabilities (31 percent). Eighteen percent of disabilities reported by institutions were for students with ADD/ADHD, 15 percent of disabilities were mental illness/psychological or psychiatric conditions, and 11 percent of disabilities were a health impairment/condition.
- Among institutions that enrolled students with disabilities during the 2008–09 academic year, 71 percent provided alternative exam formats such as large print, Braille, and audio formats; 70 percent provided adaptive equipment and technology such as assistive listening devices and talking computers; 66 percent provided audio textbooks/digitally recorded texts; 51 percent provided large print or Braille materials; and 25 percent provided real-time captioning.

## Key Findings from the 1999 Report

- NCES previously reported results from a similar survey conducted in 1998. While some survey items across the surveys are comparable, the specific disability categories are different.
- In the earlier survey, 72 percent of the nation’s two- and four-year postsecondary education institutions enrolled students with disabilities. Almost all (98 percent) public 2-year and 4-year institutions reported enrolling students with disabilities.
- Institutions reported enrolling an estimated 428,280 students with disabilities in the 1996-97 or 1997-98 school year, with approximately half of these students reported enrolled in public 2-year institutions.
- In the earlier survey, respondents were instructed to include Attention Deficit Disorder in the category for specific learning disabilities. This combined category was the most frequently reported disability, with almost half of the students with disabilities reported in this category.
- Among institutions that enrolled students with disabilities during the 1996-97 or 1997-98 academic year, 58 percent provided adaptive equipment and technology, 55 percent provided textbooks on tape, and 88 percent provided alternative exam formats or additional time.

## Data Collection Challenges

- Unduplicated versus duplicated counts: Despite repeated attempts to design the survey in a way that encouraged respondents to provide unduplicated counts of students with disabilities by disability category and in the total, a large proportion of respondents indicated that they were

unable to do so, particularly with respect to counts by disability category. While 94 percent of institutions provided an unduplicated count of the total number of students with disabilities, only about two-thirds of institutions provided unduplicated counts by disability category.

- Record-keeping: Some institutions were not able to provide unduplicated counts because their record-keeping systems are not set up that way (e.g., they don't indicate a primary disability).
- Duplication by semester: Several institutions track students with disabilities by semester and as a result, students enrolled across multiple semesters were counted multiple times.
- Philosophical issue: During the feasibility and pretest calls, some respondents were resistant to reporting unduplicated counts because the method underreports the number of disabilities students have (i.e., students with multiple disabilities).
- **Comparability of disability categories**
  - There are no federal reporting requirements for postsecondary institutions so there is no consistency with respect to how postsecondary institutions keep their data on students with disabilities. Sometimes public institutions within a state will track their data similarly due to state requirements. Some institutions had as few as four disability categories; others had more than a dozen.
  - Disability terminology was not used consistently across institutions. For example, the terms cognitive difficulties (added by OMB during its review), intellectual disabilities, and mental retardation were meant to be synonymous, but respondents often defined cognitive difficulties and intellectual disabilities broadly (e.g., including students with learning disabilities).
- **Other, specify category:** There were a wide range of responses included in the other category, including temporary disabilities, substance abuse, and disabilities that were expected to be reported in one of the listed specific disability categories (e.g., epilepsy).
  - Respondents also included students who did not have disabilities as defined by the Department of Education (e.g., English Language Learners, students needing remediation). This can be partly attributed to the fact that respondents to the survey were often in offices that handled accommodations and special services for a number of students, not just those with disabilities, and it was difficult for them to disaggregate their information.
- **Record-keeping systems:**
  - The sophistication and capabilities for record-keeping systems vary widely among institutions. Some institutions still rely on paper records; others were in the process of transitioning to more robust electronic systems.
  - For some institutions, types of disabilities were less important for their work than the accommodations students needed. As a result, some systems were organized by accommodation, not disability.
- **Student type:** Respondents were sometimes unsure whether to include graduate students or students enrolled in noncredit courses in their counts.